

## PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

**Interviewee:** John Carter

**Interviewer:** Jeannine Spurgin

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**Location:** Plainfield, Indiana

*Abstract: John Carter is a senior resident of Plainfield, Indiana. He is also a retired high school history teacher. He tells us about his pandemic experience and gives us some insight into the nature of the pandemic in regards to people's perceptions, and historical context. His overarching concerns about how we deal with major American issues focus on the declining faith in government and the lack of participation on local levels.*

JS: This is Jeannine Spurgin, today is September 4, 2020, and I'm interviewing John Carter, who is a Plainfield resident, a senior and a long-time history teacher, and we're going to get his perspective on the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. When you first heard about the virus, what were your thoughts about it?

JC: Well, I think that I was...I follow the news fairly closely, so I knew that it was pretty serious, but I think it was probably when my youngest daughter showed up at my house, unannounced, one day, I think it was early March, and I didn't think much of it. Then I noticed that she was standing at the pantry with the door open and she had her phone open to Skype with her sister. They were looking at my pantry, and they were going over things, they were talking about what needed to be bought, and then she said, "Dad, can I have your credit card?" Ok. So off she went, and she came back an hour and a half later with about \$250 worth of stuff to stock me up for the pandemic. So, that made it very clear that she and her sister were taking it very, very seriously. I was too, but because I'm retired, I don't go out a whole lot, anyway. I do go out. I go out to eat with some of my friends, ride my bike, but I'm not a real socially active person. So, it wasn't something that, initially, I was shocked about, but I knew it was pretty serious. I could tell that from the early reports, even as early as late January and early February.

JS: Have your thoughts changed since then?

JC: Oh, I've become aware it's a lot more serious! This is no joke, this is pretty serious. Especially when you look at the numbers, and in our own families, we've had a positive test identified. So, you take it pretty seriously, especially since we have a newborn in our family, and I'm at a certain age. I keep thinking, years from now, when people look at this, will that phrase mean anything? "A certain age," will that mean anything? I don't know. But, you know, I think I try to be careful myself.

JS: How do you think the pandemic has affected our community as a whole?

JC: Well, I think there's a heightened awareness, for sure. I see people wearing masks quite a few places, and businesses have either slowed down or closed temporarily, some permanently. One thing that surprises me is that there seems to be more traffic during the daytime. Before

the pandemic, I used to go down and let out my youngest daughter's dogs. I'd drive home, and she lives on Main Street, and quite often I could turn out, there was very little traffic. Today, there's more traffic, or not today, but since the pandemic began, more people are out of work, or home, I guess, and it seems to me that there are more people driving around during the daytime than there used to be. But I think the community has overall taken it very seriously, although, because of the proximity to Indianapolis and being a metropolitan area generally, we have a higher incidence just because of the demographics and higher per capita, more people packed into a smaller area.

JS: Has the pandemic changed your relationships with your family and friends. Have things changed?

JC: I think two things are clearer. One is that we interact much more than we did before. I talk every day with my daughters. It used to be every couple of days, and we'd talk on the phone or whatever. My oldest daughter is in Bloomington, and I go down there every couple of weeks to have lunch or supper with her, or something like that. But we do talk more often. So I think, actually, we're closer in the sense that we focus on communication more, but we don't see each other physically nearly as much.

JS: I've had a lot of people say that. That's a really nice development.

JC: Yes.

JS: What have been the biggest challenges that you've faced during this time?

JC: I think, there's not much I've been challenged with. I think it's been easy. I've told many people this has been easier on me because I'm retired, because I'm fairly financially secure, I just personally don't have a lot of worries. I don't like being cooped up as much as I am, although I ride my bike almost every day just to get out, and sometimes take a car ride, just to go out and see that there's an outside world. Usually, I'd drive out and try to get myself lost so I can find my way back. It's a form of entertainment.

JS: What have been your primary sources of news?

JC: Well, I watch the news quite a bit. I should say, I consume the news quite a bit. I subscribe to the *New York Times*. I take the *Indianapolis Star*. I don't watch cable news very much. In fact, I hardly ever watch cable news. I also subscribe to *The New Yorker*. I do have friends on Facebook, and they post things. Like a lot of people, to a certain extent, I'm in a political bubble, because most of my friends are fairly liberal, most are ex-teachers, and you know, those are some things we share. But I do try to expose myself to views that are not always compatible with my particular viewpoint.

JS: What are your sources for alternative views, like Fox, or...

JC: No, I can't do Fox! I just cannot do Fox. But a number of my friends are Trump supporters, so they post, and we have back-and-forth, there's a lot of back-and-forth going on, especially Facebook. Facebook is a place, I think, where you see more give and take, especially the George Floyd and Kenosha situations, people who are Trump supporters, they fuel the incidents

in terms of people violating the law, and they tend to be more pro-police. So, I get a pretty good dose of other points of view.

JS: Do you know anybody who's changed their minds about anything during the pandemic?

JC: No, I don't know of anybody. My sense is that there are people who are paying attention, more than they paid attention in the past. And again, you have to keep in mind there is stuff posted by people online saying this former Trump supporter, yada yada yada. I don't know if it's true or not. But no, I don't know anybody.

JS: What about the community leaders here in Hendricks County? How do you think they responded?

JC: I think that the problem is that most of us don't pay attention to local news. That's what I think one of the fundamental problems is. We're so absorbed and exposed to national news stories that local tends to get second place. So one thing I would say is that Senator Young has posted...he no longer does, but he did post for several weeks, the COVID numbers for Hendricks County. I thought that was very good. I thanked him, I thought that it was really good that he did that. I wish he would continue to do that. I do see in some of the postings, when I look at school board meetings or town council events, people are sitting socially distant, wearing masks; but then again, I've seen people...in fact I saw the other day Senator Young was in town looking at the new parking garage. He was seen with one of the council people, and they were walking down the street, not socially distancing and not wearing masks! But, you know, I understand. I think, overall, they've done an ok job, but I think their problem is that this pandemic is not just here in Plainfield, it's all over the United States and all over the world, so... But I think that's one of the problems with our political system, too, is that because we're so divided up. As you know, there are some parts of the country where they just aren't doing anything, they think it's all an exaggeration, nobody's wearing a mask, they don't care. In other places, people are very, very, almost anal mask-wearing attitude.

JS: One thing I found real curious was that Indiana was one of the first states to open up, and we don't seem to be having the terrible surge that all lot of the other states are having. Do you have any idea what the reason for that might be? I can't figure it out, myself.

JC: Well, my suspicion is that those numbers are...this is a very fluid situation. Things change from week to week, and a lot depends, obviously, on people's behavior, and we can't really monitor what everybody else is doing. I just saw this morning in the paper that Hendricks County is ranked in the moderate level; we're not in the severe or best categories; we still have cases, there are still a few deaths occasionally. But I don't have a really good answer for that. I wish I did.

JS: Yeah, it's curious. So, as a history teacher, I thought we'd get a better perspective from you. You know that history can be skewed by powers that be. In the instance that the truth has been blurred, 50 to 100 years from now, what would you most want students to know about this crisis?

JC: Well, I would say that the thing that concerns me most is the politicization of the virus. And this, I think, can be laid right at the doorstep of the president. Just yesterday, he criticized Joe

Biden for wearing masks, and making fun of him for doing that! Which I think shows that fact that it has become a political issue, which is really, really sad! And again, that's a reflection of, I think, our social and political divide. It's also a reflection of the ambivalence and disinterest people have in politics generally; it has become sort of a game that you watch on TV or social media, with one side trying to one-up the other, you know. It's just sad. And I think the other thing is that it's revealed the deep social issues in our society - racism; we're seeing that the minority communities, or what we now call "people of color," those communities are having much higher rates of the COVID. There have also been some good things. There have been some really wonderful examples of volunteerism, and people who are first responders, nurses and doctors who have put themselves in harm's way, and have done just amazingly wonderful things. So, that's one issue. The other issue would be, since I taught government for a long time, we are a nation that has two conflicting ideals, which is the "common good" versus the "individual freedom." And I think that individual freedom is reflected in the fact that a lot of people are of the opinion that "you can't make me wear a mask because it's my right to not wear a mask." I can see the argument there, but the common good tends to take second place. I think that's been the trend, really, from the 70s onward. You know, I grew up in the 1950s, in the shadow of WWII. In those days, we were still in the time where we were thinking in terms of the nation as a whole, what is best for everybody, even though there were a lot of problems that were not being addressed then. That was much more commonly accepted than today. Beginning in the 60s and 70s, with the "do your own thing, man" kind of thing, and now we have today, individual freedom is much more prevalent than the common good.

JS: I've noticed that.

JC: Which means sacrifices for the other person is something we are less inclined to do, especially when you don't like the other guy, and consider the other guy a rotten person.

JS: Yeah, and with the political divide, obviously that's going to happen. That's an interesting perspective. I've heard people saying, "I don't have to wear a mask." And when you ask them, "Well what about everybody else," they just don't care; it doesn't make any sense at all. I thought it was an interesting thing you said, that it started in the 70s, because I've been wondering about that - is it something we've always been doing? Is that the "American Way?" But I guess it's not, since it was different in the 50s.

JC: I'm not conversant enough on that issue, but I do think it's clear that the "do your own thing"...if you think about how many times have you seen or heard a college or high school commencement speaker say, "Follow your dream!" This kind of thing. I know a lot of speakers also talk about doing something for humanity, not just for yourself. It's a very common theme of our time, that we do emphasize that. And you can see, when you look at countries that have been successful in dealing with this COVID, they've tended to be the countries that have a more authoritarian form of government. China's probably a classic example. They simply mandate that certain behaviors are required and that is not the case here.

JS: Since we're talking globally, how does this pandemic rank as far as others go, for scope and global impact?

JC: That's hard to say from within. I mean, 70 years from now, we may have a clearer picture. I'm sure it's ironic, people saying 2020; 20/20 is something we don't have right now because

we're living in it. It's hard to say. I don't know what the hard numbers are, so I can't really give a specific example. I'm pretty much amazed that in a lot of places, things are functioning normally. But I think there are a lot of places that aren't on the radar right now, especially very poor areas of the world that are having some really hard times. Clearly, I think one of the results have been, and I think this has been a trend for the last several years, will be a movement away from globalization, at least politically, although economically, nothing is likely to change. The president talks about America First, but if you look at Wall Street, if you look at the economy, we are deeply involved in a global economy. That is not something that you can just wish away.

JS: Is there any advice you'd want to give world leaders now regarding the pandemic?  
(laughter) In all of your wisdom!

JC: Well, put on your big boy pants and let's get serious. Actually, Angela Merkel, in Germany, I wish we had more of her around. Although she's having a tough time there, too. But if you ask me who we should model, I'd say her leadership has been...and also, the lady in New Zealand, I forget her name. But I know it's an entirely different situation. But you know, Sweden is a good example. They just said, "well, we'll just continue on." They thought herd immunity would take over, but of course, what's happened is, they've been hit really hard. Their next-door-neighbor, Norway, they were pretty stringent in their approach and they've had far fewer cases and far fewer deaths. So, the example of Sweden is one not to follow.

JS: Do you have any other tidbits of wisdom before we end this?

JC: I think one point I was going to make on your first question was that the thing that concerns me, again because I taught government, is the decline in faith in government, and the lack of participation. Most people can name the president, and they can name some high-ranking leaders like Secretary of State, but if you ask them who is your mayor, or your congressman, who's your state rep, your state senator - sometimes even the governor - they look at you with a blank expression. I'm in a book club, and a book we read is called Station Eleven. If you want to read a book that's really interesting, it's a dystopian novel about a future pandemic. It's really interesting because it was written by a woman, I think four or five years ago, long before this happened. And so it's really interesting to view the world that she imagines in her book versus the reality of what we're experiencing today.

JS: Who's the author?

JC: Mandel is the last name, I think. It's a really interesting book that will give you a different perspective on the pandemic. I must point out that their pandemic is much more serious than ours, at least at this point. But it's a good book for getting perspective.

JS: Well, John, thank you so much for participating, we really appreciate your perspective.